

CONNECTING THE DOTS: A Case Study

Universities

Monday, September 22, 11:00-12:00

Great University has included in its long-range plan the intention to enhance its mission by forming partnerships and collaborations with both private and public sector organizations within its immediate community, its region, and the state. At its quarterly board meeting the president presents an item for consideration that she believes to be one way to further this goal.

The president proposes a partnership with local government and industry to link training opportunities with existing programs and classes offered by the university. Three members of the faculty, chosen by the dean, would work with the city's economic development director and two representatives from the local Chamber of Commerce as an ad hoc group to develop a proposed agreement. A first draft would be presented for discussion at the next quarterly meeting of the board.

The president indicates that in her initial conversations with the mayor and the Chamber Director they had discussed a few possibilities:

The city would consider donating a parcel of land it owns at the edge of campus as the site for a conference and training center to be built by the university.

- * The university would encourage a donor potentially interested in underwriting the costs of construction of the new building.

The chamber would consider promoting the new offerings in its newsletters and through special mailings to its membership, and would develop an internship program for students with local businesses.

When the president opens the floor for discussion, Mr. Seller, an entrepreneur known for his string of highly successful furniture stores, is the first to speak. Other board members chime in.

Mr. Seller: "I appreciate the thought and effort that have gone into this, but I think we're getting the cart in front of the horse. I need to know more about what we're going to get from this. I mean, why are we putting all this effort into something that seems a bit to the side of our real job? It would be like adding clothing or cosmetics to my furniture stores. It's not what we do."

Ms. Booker: "I think Mr. Seller has a good point. We have to be careful with our resources, even our potential resources. I think we all have a pretty good idea of who the potential building donor might be, and there are other uses that money might be put to, like expanding the library. We've talked about that need for years and never done anything about it."

Dr. Curry: "I agree. I don't see how this is central to our mission of educating students. This whole idea of collaboration strikes me as just the latest fad going around. My colleagues and I believe our job is to provide a solid education for our students so they can then go out and contribute to society. I don't want to spend my time meeting with the Chamber of Commerce or negotiating with them about what the syllabus for my course ought to be."

Mr. Gravely: "I understand the concerns, but let me provide a little background here that might be helpful. It's important to remember that we included work on partnerships and collaborations in our recent revision of the university's mission. We had a full discussion of this general issue at the board retreat, and I think we ought not to ignore the decisions we have made about our mission. And as for this specific proposal, President Nicely has shared some of her thoughts about this with me as we shaped the agenda for this meeting. As chair, I've been interested in having issues like this

come before the board for discussion. Some of our sister institutions around the state have begun working on collaborations and partnerships, and my thought is that we should at least explore some options. I know there are risks to trying new approaches, but I believe there also are risks for continuing to do business as usual. We need to see what opportunities are out there for improving the way we do our work. I'd like to see the board taking more of a leadership role in moving the university forward on these kinds of issues."

Mr. Seller: "Well, if we are heading in this direction, we ought to make sure it's right for us. I know that the analysis the president provided us shows that because of the economic downturn we have had 1,700 people lose their jobs in our region. I understand many of these people need our help in getting more education or retraining so they can go back to work. The survey of businesses showing their needs for employee development shows a real demand for this type of partnership as well. We sure want to keep the employers we have. On the other hand, the education needs analysis recently done by our local P-16 council shows our region has one of the lowest college-going rates in the state and that our poor and minority students are really being left out. Many are dropping out of high school and even fewer are going to college. Maybe we should be devoting our efforts to a partnership with our K-12 schools in the region. President Smith of our neighboring community college also showed us statistics indicating her enrollment is way up and particularly with minority students but that far too few of her students are transferring to us. She needs our help. The question for me is not whether we should be partnering but who we should be partnering with to do what."

Mr. Broad: "I know that Central University has been working on economic development issues with its community, but I think they got dragged into that by the local business leaders, and I'm not sure how well it's working."

Ms. Verity: "Central may have been reluctant, but I know Forest State has been working with the school systems in its region for a number of years to develop joint programs and joint approaches to improving P-16 education. They seem to be having great success. That may be because collaboration with other education institutions is a better fit. That's the kind of collaboration we ought to be thinking about. We have the expertise, and we can apply it locally. It also fits with the interest at the state level to have more cooperation among the P-16 organizations in a region."

Ms. Booker: "It sounds like we don't really have a lot of information about what works and what doesn't. I'd want to know what universities are doing in other states, too, not just Kentucky."

Mr. Seller: "Let's not get into another study, or set up another committee. We have a specific proposal on the table. I say, let's vote it up or down and go on."

Dr. Curry: "At this point the proposal is to get three of our faculty with some of the city government and chamber folks to see what they can come up with. I'm not wild about the idea, but I don't see any harm in it. Let's see what they come back with."

President Nicely: "The only word of caution I would add is that I don't think we should proceed with this preliminary work if most of the board is leaning toward opposition to the general idea. If that's the case, then any draft agreement that the ad hoc group comes up with, no matter how good, is likely to be rejected. We don't want to waste everyone's time."

Mr. Gravely: "I agree. So let me be clear about what is being voted on here. A yes vote means that you support the work toward a collaborative agreement and can imagine some proposal you could support."

Mr. Broad: "I understand about not gathering a whole lot of information about what others are doing, but I'd at least like to have some discussion of other kinds of collaborations or partnerships we might pursue. I'm committed to the principles we outlined in our mission, but I think there are many ways to follow them. We have only this one proposal, and nothing to compare it to."

Mr. Gravely: "I understand your concern, but I would hate to hold up this proposal while we generate other options. We'll have time to do that while the ad hoc group is working on a draft agreement."

After some further discussion about the details of the proposed agreement and the role of each of the parties, Mr. Gravely calls for the vote on the proposal. The proposal passes on a unanimous voice vote.

Questions:

Did the board make a good decision?

Which issues raised by board members are legitimate? What are the reasons for your judgments about legitimacy?

What is the appropriate role of the board in the arena of collaborations and partnerships? Sounding board? Advisors? Decision makers?

How early in the process should the board be involved? Should the president have had exploratory conversations with others besides the chairperson?

At what level of detail should the board be involved?

Bringing it home:

What issues raised in the case study are applicable to your institution?

What issues are relevant to your work as trustees?

You have been provided real data for your region on economic, health, and educational issues.

Look at the three highlighted statistics in your data. What do these numbers suggest about priorities for collaboration and partnerships in your region?

What other data would you want from your region before establishing your priorities for collaboration?

What should be your next steps as a board in establishing priorities and creating partnerships to address public needs?